

The First Church Critics

(Acts 6:1-7)

10/16/19; Wed PM Pine Grove

Introduction

Take your Bibles and turn to Acts 6.

We begin a new chapter tonight in the book of Acts, which is the historical account of the beginning of the church.

The church is but days or weeks old as we start chapter 6..

So, let's read the first 7 verses of Acts 6...

1 Now [a]at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the [b]Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. 2 So the twelve summoned the [c]congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. 3 Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the [d]ministry of the word." 5 The statement found approval

with the whole [e]congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and [f]Nicolas, a [g]proselyte from Antioch. 6 And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

7 The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

Up until December 1, 1913, it took 12 hours to assemble a Ford Model T.

Though that was an engineering feat for that era, Henry Ford was working on a way to do it faster.

You see, Ford's mission was to "make sure that about everybody in America owned a Ford motor car."

However, a 12 hour per car pace was not going to get it done.

So Ford began looking at other companies that mass produced their products.

He looked at watch companies and food companies and any industry that was producing large amounts of their product.

And putting all those pieces together, Ford developed the moving assembly line.

Instead of Model T's being pulled through the factory for 12 hours on large skids as they were being assembled, Ford decided to build a moving platform.

This first of its kind automotive assembly line required 84 steps but produced a car every 2 hours and 30 minutes.

Suddenly, Ford cars were being bought by a large segment of the American population, and that nation would never be the same.

Ford would go on to say that he didn't have the best idea.

He didn't design the best car.

But he did have the best organization, and that is what allowed him to succeed.

As we arrive at Acts 6 tonight, the church is in desperate need of some organization.

Though it is but weeks or months old, it is already 10,000 + members strong.

God has been using the preaching of Peter to save hundreds of souls who are coming to believe that Jesus is the Christ.

God has been using the witness of the church to draw people to hear and believe the gospel.

But at this point, these new Christians lack any sort of organization.

There is not even a church building at this point.

You have a collection of believers that are gathering daily in homes and as a large group in the temple.

So there is some level of chaos and disorganization at this point.

Now I remind you that God is a God of order.

If you look at the very beginning, God created a sense of order.

In 6 days, God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them.

He created man and woman and established marriage which brings order to society.

He then established the nation Israel and divided them into 12 tribes.

He gave them a sacrificial system.

He gave them a priesthood.

And both top those things had tremendous order and detail.

The same was true of the temple.

There were instructions on top of instructions on how to construct and conduct affairs in the temple.

God is a God of order.

It is seen in everything He creates and organizes.

Well, the church is going to be organized as well.

And that is what we are going to begin to see tonight in Acts 6.

Now this won't be the final structure of the church.

God is going to give instruction and pastors and elders and deacons to Paul to give to the church a few decades later.

But what we see tonight is the idea of God organizing the church from its very beginning.

Now why is this important?

Well, there are a number of Christians through the years and even today who resist the idea of organization in the church.

They claim that every believer has the Holy Spirit and we should be led by Him as we function in the world.

These people resist the idea of denominational organization.

They resist the idea of any structure within the church.

They resist any form of church leadership.

Instead, they like “letting the Spirit lead” in the church.

Now some of that is biblical.

Every believer does possess the Holy Spirit.

Every believer is called to walk by the Spirit in all areas of life including the church.

Yet, that does not mean that the church should lack organization.

In fact, I would say that Spirit leads believers to be more organized.

He leads people to structure and order and discipline in their lives.

And we will be reminded of that tonight in Acts 6..

Let's begin in verse 1 with what we will call..

I. Stirrings in the Church (1)

1 Now [a]at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the [b]Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.

As we have said on a number of occasions, the opening chapters of Acts are a description of what we could call the Golden Age of the church.

It has been a glorious time.

For the first time in history, believers possess the Holy Spirit.

And He has been doing incredible things in their midst.

He has enabled Christians to speak in foreign languages for a time so that the gospel can be heard by the various people of the world.

He has empowered Peter to preach the Word with power and boldness.

He has given the apostles the ability to heal diseases and cast out demons.

It is truly an incredible time to be a believer in this infant church.

But the church is not without problems.

As we said earlier, when God works, Satan shows up to oppose His work.

And so far, we have seen the arrest of Peter and John for preaching the resurrection of Christ.

Then we saw the arrest of all the apostles for preaching in Jesus' name.

And we have also seen sin within the church.

As much as God is active in getting the church off to a good start, Satan is active in trying to stop any progress of the church.

And he has used outward and inward sin, but now he turns to one of his favorite schemes and that is dissension within the church.

This isn't necessarily sin within the church, but it can be just as destructive because what you see in verse 1 are simply stirrings or grumblings within the church.

Look, even believers battle an old flesh.

Though we are new creatures, old habits die hard, and one of the hardest sin habits to kill is pride..

Everyone in the church is susceptible to it, and we see it here in verse 1 of Acts 6.

Though the first few words of the verse demonstrate that the church is growing, some believers are not happy.

And what aren't they happy about?

Simply put, some aren't happy with food distribution to the widows in the church.

Now before I explain what the problem was, let me simply say this..

The church will never be perfect in how it functions.

Sometimes, that imperfection won't affect you, and sometimes it will affect you.

The question is simply this..

When you are affected by the imperfection of the church, can you endure it to maintain the peace or will you complain?

Well, some in the church in Acts 6 complained.

In fact, it is called a complaint in verse 1.

The King James describes it as a murmuring.

And the Greek word here has a negative connotation.

It suggests a secret displeasure.

In other words, there are times when people have a legitimate question for the question for the church in how they are handling things.

But there are times when it is nothing more than grumbling, complaining, and murmuring in the church due to personal preference.

The issue in verse 1 was not constructive criticism meant to help the church, it was a destructive complaint.

And those are never good for the health of the church.

Now what are the murmurings about?

Well, you need to understand that the early church is made up of mostly Jews.

Peter preached his first 2 sermons at Pentecost, when Jews from all the world were present in Jerusalem for this 2nd festival on the Jewish calendar.

And so what you had in the early church was a mixture of former Jews.

Some were native to Israel and some were living in other nations around the Mediterranean.

The Jews not native to Israel were called Hellenistic Jews.

Hellenistic simply means Greek.

In this context, it means any Jews who wasn't living in Israel.

Well, the Hellenistic Jews were grumbling about how their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.

Now understand.

Jews may have been wrong in most of their theology but they always cared for the widow among them.

That instruction was found in the OT and Jews took it to heart to care for widows in their midst.

And they were doing that even though they had now come out of Judaism and trusted in Christ.

But there's a problem.

The non-native Jewish widows were being slighted in food distribution.

Now remember, this early church is extremely poor.

To come to Christ cost you everything in this culture.

In fact, most if not all converts simply stayed in Jerusalem after they were saved because they had no church to go back home to.

So you have a large group of Christians now living in Jerusalem, and some in that group are widows who came to Pentecost with their families.

But this creates an incredible strain on the people in this church because they still have to eat multiple times a day.

Now some of that demand is helped by people selling property and homes and giving the proceeds to the church.

WE have already seen that.

But it seems that the proceeds to feed the widows were being distributed equally.

The text doesn't really say.

It just says they were being overlooked.

So that is the issue, but how will it be handled?

This leads us to verses 2-4, which we will call...

II. Solutions from the Leadership (2-4)

2 So the twelve summoned the [c]congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.

3 Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.

4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the [d]ministry of the word.”

Lots of very helpful instruction here as the apostles respond to the complaints of the people.

The first thing to take note of is this..

Church leaders are peacemakers and problem solvers.

Look, there are bigger problems in a church when the leader creates more problems and further more issues than they solve.

My role and the deacons role here is the address murmurings and provide biblical solutions.

For leaders to ignore complaints is often detrimental to the health of a church.

Though every complaint may not require a solution, many do and church leaders are wise to deal with things when they come up..

A second truth to see here is the primary function of leaders..

And that is prayer and the ministry of the word.

In other words, a pastor or group of pastors could literally run themselves silly trying to deal with every issue in the church..

And many do just that for various reasons.

However the primary role of the pastor and elders is to pray and preach.

Look, even a church the size of Pine Grove is overwhelming to me when you consider all that goes on here each week.

Some things I wish I could do, but can't.

Some things I have I have no desire to do but no one else will do them.

But every week, my first priority is studying for 3 sermons and praying for the flock.

That is what I must do each week, and ultimately, that will benefit the church more than anything else I could ever do for y'all.

The 12 apostles were gifted men, but even they couldn't manage 10,000 + members in the church.

In fact, they couldn't have managed all the needs of a 1000 members..

So what was the solution?

Well, they told the church in verse 3 to find 7 men of good reputation to oversee the daily serving of food to the widows.

Now to be clear, these aren't the first deacons.

A lot of people preach that but understand that the Lord has not provided that instruction to the church yet.

Deacons and elders will come, but now they just need a few men of good reputation and wisdom to head up the task of food distribution..

So how will this solution be received by the church?

Verses 5 and 6 will show us..

III. Submission by the People (5-6)

Verse 5..

5 The statement found approval with the whole [e]congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and [f]Nicolas, a [g]proselyte from Antioch.

I love this scene.

There's a problem in the church.

The most spiritually mature men in the church offer a solution to the church.

The church receives the suggestion, submits to it, and follows through with it.

This is how the church is supposed to function.

When the people in the church resist the suggestion and decisions of leadership, there is always harm to the church in the long run.

Churches function well and are pleasing to the Lord when the people submit to the leaders that God has placed over them.

The early church listened to the counsel and suggestion of the apostles and they selected 7 men to handle and oversee the task of food distribution to the widows..

Now, also the note of this..

Every one of these 7 men has a Hellenistic name..

Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and [f]Nicolas are all Greek names.

In other words, the church elected Hellenistic men to make sure that the Hellenistic widows were being treated fairly.

Now the obvious observation is this..

Why would you put all Greek Jews over a ministry to the Greek widows?

Well, it would be a show of solidarity and unity.

If the Greek Jews felt that the Greek widows were being slighted, then they should oversee the ministry.

And we won't select one native Jew, so that the Greek Jews know that we trust them.

You see the early church was more concerned about unity than fairness.

If this problem happened today in our politically correct church environment, we would have a committee of 3 Greek Jews and 3 Hellenistic Jews and a Gentile to make sure everyone is equally represented.

Look, the early church wanted to display love and trust to one another and if that meant all Greek Jews on the ministry team, that is what they wanted.

I love that strategy of doing ministry.

You need to put people in charge of ministries that they have an interest and stake in.

And you don't worry if they will show favoritism or do things unfairly.

You put them there and you trust them to do the right thing.

You can never build a successful church or have a successful ministry based on distrust.

Will people in ministry fail? Sure.

Will they take advantage of your trust? You bet.

But trusting others in ministry is better for the health of the church and the witness of the church to the world.

I have often told people this..

If you don't trust the leadership of the church, go somewhere else.

It will be better for you and for the church.

Distrust is a deadly disease in a church.

So the people submit and follow the plan of the apostles, and what is the result?

Verse 6..

6 And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

The people submit to the apostles plan and then notice that apostles approve the 7 men they chose by laying hands on them.

Trust in a two way street in the church.

The people have to trust the leadership and the leadership has to trust the people.

The 7 men are brought before the apostles and they pray for them and lay hands on them.

No fussing.

No fighting.

WE submitted to your plan.

He are the 7 men we selected.

And here are the blessings of the apostles.

What a picture of a healthy church, and healthy churches are effective in their communities..

Let's finish with verse 7..

We will call this..

IV. Success of the Gospel (7)

7 The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

All of this unity and love and mutual submission in the church fathered the work of the Lord in Jerusalem.

In fact, Jewish priests were being saved.

That seems to be an interesting verse just thrown in here, but it is here by no accident..

You see, the witness of church leadership to the people in the church made an impact on those in leadership positions in Judaism.

You see, when the church functions as it should from top to bottom and bottom to top, the world takes notice.

And that was clearly the case here as the priests were coming to faith in Christ and being saved.

Conclusion

So what does all this history of the early church mean to us?

#1 - Inequality is present in the church.

As we pointed out earlier, the church is not perfect.

You will be slighted in church.

You may be overlooked in the church.

You may have your feelings hurt in the church.

This is the nature of the church.

It exists in a fallen world and is made up of fallen people.

Now our goal is to righteous living and biblical justice, but we fall short.

The question is not will you be offended, but will you be quick to forgive?

So much grumbling and complaining could be avoided in the church if we simply placed our preferences under the preferences of others..

Philippians 2:3 should be the motto of every church..

3 Do nothing [a]from [b]selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves;

The way to fight inequality in the church is not to see yourself as most important but rather least important..

#2 - Priority is necessary for church leadership.

The apostles were busy men in the early days of the church, but their priority was prayer and preaching.

May I never lose sight of the things that I am called and commend to do here in ministry.

And may you never lose of those priorities in my life as well..

#3 - Prosperity is found when the church submits.

When people in the church have to have their way or try to make their own way, the church is harmed.

But when people in the church submit to leadership and to one another, the church is a thing of beauty and an effective witness for the Lord.

The church is a powerful force for the Lord when it submits to Him and one another.

Prosperity for the early church was not found in programs or activities or any other artificial means of growing the church.

Prosperity in the early church was found when those in the church solved problems in love and trust.

May we follow their example.

Let us pray.